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# Mexico: The New Wave of Illegal Migration (U)

An Intelligence Assessment

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*ALA 83-10096*
*June 1983*

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# Mexico:
# The New Wave of Illegal Migration (U)

**An Intelligence Assessment**

This assessment was prepared by [redacted] 25X1
the Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and the National Intelligence Council. [redacted] 25X1

Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Middle American–Caribbean Division, ALA, [redacted] 25X1

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# Mexico: The New Wave of Illegal Migration (U)

## Key Judgments

*Information available as of 15 June 1983 was used in this report.*

Economic problems and population pressures are combining to encourage unprecedented numbers of Mexicans to cross the US border illegally. We expect as many as 1.5 million undocumented Mexicans to enter the United States during 1983 in search of jobs, compared with an estimated 800,000 to 1.1 million annually in recent years. Most of the new arrivals will return to Mexico within six months, but some 300,000 probably will remain, joining the 1.3-2.3 million Mexican illegals that we believe resided in the United States on a semipermanent basis in 1982. We estimate that remittances from Mexicans working illegally in the United States will total $1.5-3.5 billion during 1983.

The severe economic dislocations that are largely responsible for the surge have intensified a long-term response to the attractions of high US wages and the problems of poverty in Mexico. Peso devaluations have nearly tripled the dollar's purchasing power in Mexico, unemployment is expanding, and real wages at home are falling. In addition, for many years, Mexicans have earned 10 or more times in the United States what they could earn at home. This income supplement has maintained or boosted migrants' living standards in Mexico even as economic conditions deteriorated in rural areas and urban job opportunities became scarce.

Survey data continue to indicate that the majority of illegals are from the rural areas of eight north-central states. Nevertheless, a growing number of urban Mexicans—primarily from depressed shantytowns ringing larger cities—are joining the illegal migrant ranks.

Mexican illegal migrants fit primarily into one of two groups: long termers, who have been in the United States illegally for a year or more, and repeaters, who make periodic work trips but spend most of each year in Mexico. According to academic studies, both long termers and repeaters want to use savings from US earnings to supplement consumption and eventually provide for upward mobility at home. The repeaters, however, would be most vulnerable to restrictions on employment opportunities or tighter controls on the border. Moreover, they account for the bulk of worker remittances and directly affect Mexican labor market and consumption trends.



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We see almost no chance that the current wave of Mexicans coming to the United States will slow dramatically any time soon. We expect Mexico's economy to remain depressed for the next two or three years. Even after the economy recovers in the mid-to-late 1980s, we estimate that the number of Mexican migrants will remain high because of demographic pressures and a further widening in the gap between Mexican and US wages.

Mexican Government officials view illegal migration and continuing access to the US labor market as critical to the country's economic and social well-being. Moreover, they believe there is little Washington can do to fundamentally alter the pattern of Mexican migration. Nevertheless, they believe that a tightening of controls on migrants as a result of reforming US immigration laws would complicate bilateral relations.

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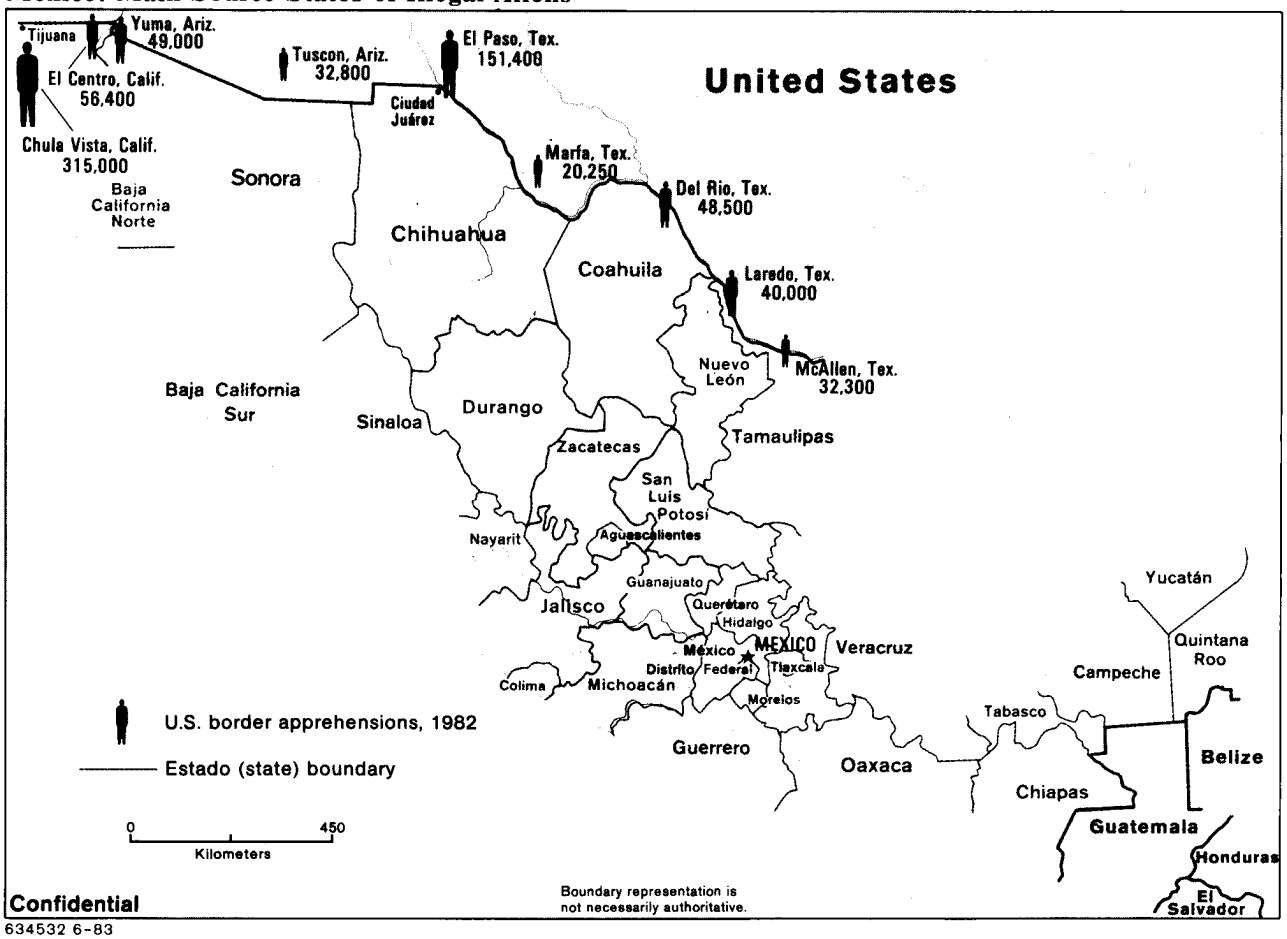
**Figure 1**
**Mexico: Main Source States of Illegal Aliens**

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# Mexico: The New Wave of Illegal Migration (U)

## Dynamics of Illegal Migration

The rising illegal flow of Mexicans to the United States is an intensification of a long-term response to the attractions of high US wages and the problems of poverty and lack of opportunity in Mexico. With substantially higher wages and the steady demand for low-cost labor in the United States over the past century, Mexican workers have developed complex networks to provide information on jobs and housing for illegal immigrants.[1] This pull from across the border has been reinforced by the push of relative deterioration in subsistence agriculture—the traditional livelihood of most illegals—and the rapid expansion of the work force. Since 1940 subsistence farms have benefited substantially less from improved farming techniques than commercial agricultural operations and this has held down peasants' incomes and exacerbated income inequalities. Additionally, Mexico's unique *ejido* system—which gives peasants perpetual *usufruct*[2] over a small plot but does not allow them to sell the land—encourages work trips to the United States to supplement income.

Survey data continue to indicate that the majority of illegals are from the rural areas of eight north-central states. Data gathered in Mexico and the United States show that most illegals still are landless rural laborers or *ejidatarios,* although a growing number of urban Mexicans—primarily from depressed shantytowns ringing larger cities—are beginning to cross the border. The primary sending states include the six agricultural states of Mexico's central north and the two northern border states with the largest populations—Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon. These states have large tracts in *ejidos,* were the source of most of the participants in the *bracero* program that provided temporary work in the United States for Mexicans in 1942-64, and have a long tradition of migration to the United States. Farm output per worker in the sending states is much lower and rural population density is much higher than in the five other states of northern Mexico.

Other areas of Mexico are not yet major sources of illegals. People from southern states have tended to remain outside the illegal flow because of the distance to the United States and the traditional culture that ties the largely Indian population to their villages. In the central region, Mexico City so far has exerted a stronger pull than the United States, partly because of social and cultural reasons.

Still, most illegals travel long distances before crossing the border; the majority of them travel 500 miles or more before reaching the United States. Tijuana—the most popular jumpoff point for the United States—is 1,000 miles from the geographic center of the sending states. Ciudad Juarez—the second most popular exit point for illegals—is more than 700 miles from the residences of most of those who illegally enter the United States from there.

High population growth provides a continuing pool of illegal immigrants. Although the rate of population increase has declined somewhat since 1970, the age cohorts entering the labor force will remain large for at least the next two decades. We expect the rate of growth of the labor force to stay at about 4 percent (excluding immigrants to Mexico from Central America) at least throughout the 1980s.

## Characteristics of the Mexican Migrant

Most Mexican illegal immigrants fit into one of two groups: those who make periodic work trips but spend most of each year in Mexico and those who have been

[1] See appendix A for a historical overview of Mexican illegal migration. (U)

[2] The legal right to use property belonging to the state or a particular community. (U)



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in the United States illegally for a year or more. According to academic studies, members of both groups want to use savings from US earnings to supplement consumption and eventually provide for upward mobility in Mexico. Men with longer continuous experience in the United States tend to earn higher wages than the temporary migrant; women earn the least, on average.

Although the majority of Mexican illegals continue to work in agriculture while in the United States, more and more are finding their niche in services, industry, construction, and commerce. Large numbers now work in restaurants and hotels as dishwashers, kitchen helpers, busboys, waiters, and clerks. Women largely find work in hotels, domestic service, or in light assembly operations.

**Repeat Migrants**

During recent years, we estimate that almost 1 million Mexicans have made annual short-term illegal work trips to the United States.[3] Those making these trips are overwhelmingly young men. Data obtained from apprehended Mexicans indicate that the average illegal immigrant is a male in his late teens when making his first of as many as five to 10 trips. The average age at initial entry has dropped by several years over the past decade. At the time of first entry, the illegal is generally literate, unmarried, and has had little experience outside of agriculture. Of those who have made several trips, perhaps half are married and support four or five dependents. Most migrants have been recently employed and, considering such migrating costs as smuggling fees of $300 to $500, cannot be among the poorest.

Others also make annual trips to the United States. A sizable, but unknown number are small landowners, commercial farm laborers, and shopkeepers. They tend to travel to the United States during slack periods in their regular occupations or during recessions at home. Recent academic studies indicate that temporary workers earn $500 to $1,000 monthly, stay an average of four to six months, and send home about one-third of their earnings.

[3] See appendix B, An Approach to Counting Illegals.

**Long-Term Migrants**

Academic studies indicate that each year 15 to 30 percent of undocumented border-crossers plan to remain in the United States for a year or more before returning home. By mid-1982 we estimate, on the basis of a recent US Census Bureau study and our own analysis of illegal migration trends, that 1.3-2.3 million Mexicans were in the United States on a semipermanent basis. These long-term migrants, on average, have higher levels of education and in most cases either bring their families along or plan to send for them. The study by the US Census Bureau suggests that 40 percent of semipermanent immigrants are female and 20 percent are children under 15 years of age. Although academic studies show that the majority of these migrants will return to Mexico within three to 10 years, some—including many of the children—will stay permanently. Because of the costs of supporting their families who are in the United States, members of this group remit a smaller share of their income to Mexico than do the repeaters.

## The Benefits and Costs of Migration

The economic incentives for migration to the United States are substantial, but there are also concerns that act to stem the flow somewhat. Today, the average rural wage in Mexico is less than one-tenth that earned by migratory farm workers in the United States. Urban minimum wages in Mexico, although about 40 percent above the rural rate, are still only a fraction of what an illegal immigrant can earn here.

Previous experience in the United States sharply reduces the psychological cost of migration. Statistics on those apprehended show that almost all illegal aliens have been to the United States before or have close friends or relatives who have made the trip. A great number of first-time illegal border-crossers had relatives in the legal *bracero* program.

Among concerns that inhibit migration, fear of arrest north of the border or of victimization by smugglers undoubtedly affects many rural Mexicans. Other,



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more educated rural Mexicans prefer to migrate to Mexican cities rather than go to the United States, where white-collar jobs demand English-language capabilities.

**Factors in the Recent Surge**

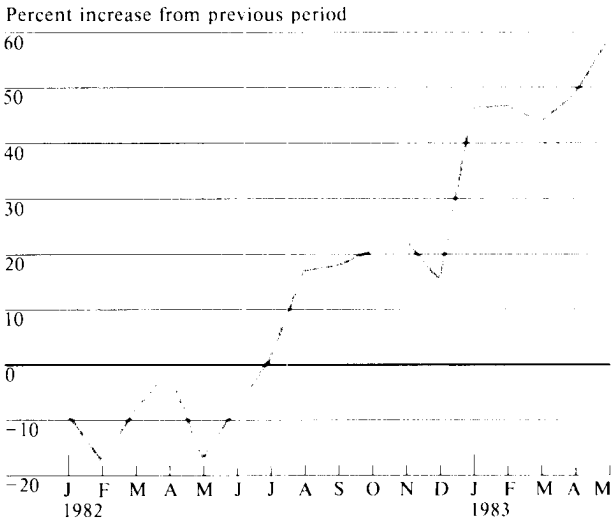
The dramatic upturn in illegal migration over the past months is widely acknowledged in Mexico. Recently, a Mexican congressional deputy reported to the legislature's Foreign Relations Committee that the flow had increased considerably and that professionals, technicians, skilled workers, and craftsmen were now among the migrants.

In the United States, soaring border apprehensions attest to the surge. While we recognize that there is no one-to-one relationship between apprehensions by the US Border Patrol and the flow of illegals—that is, the number of different individuals who successfully cross the border to work in the United States—we believe there is a close relationship. Apprehensions increased substantially following Mexico's sharp devaluation and financial crisis in August 1982. During August through December last year, border apprehensions were almost 20 percent above the same period a year earlier. During January through April 1983, apprehensions soared, up more than 45 percent above the same period a year earlier. In May, the Border Patrol apprehended 104,000 border-crossers, 58.2 percent above a year earlier. May's record apprehensions marked the 10th consecutive time that border arrests set alltime highs for a given month. If the flow remains near this level—as we expect—border apprehensions in 1983 will total some 1.2 million.

Because of rising border apprehensions, we believe the flow of illegal migrants will jump to 1.1-1.5 million for 1983, compared with an estimated 0.9-1.1 million last year.[4] Our estimate, based in part on a study of the population and labor force of sending states, falls on the low side of the current range of estimates made by academics and journalists. If history is repeated, and 15 to 30 percent of these border-crossers stay on

[4] See appendix B for our methodology of estimating numbers of illegal migrants.

**Figure 2**
**Mexico-United States: Border Apprehensions, January 1982-May 1983**

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in the United States this year, the number of illegal semipermanent Mexicans will rise to 1.4-2.5 million. We expect workers' remittances to Mexico to total $1.5-3.5 billion this year; $1-3 billion from repeaters and an additional $500 million from semipermanent migrants.

Several new economic pressures have spurred the current bulge. Mexico's sharp currency devaluations substantially raised the peso value of the dollars that the illegals earn in the United States. Even after allowing for higher inflation in Mexico since the devaluations, the dollar today buys nearly three times as much in Mexico as it did in January of last year.

In addition, recent layoffs, falling real wages, and declining living standards are now becoming important inducements for looking to the United States to supplement incomes. Private-sector economists in Mexico estimate that more than 2 million jobs have been lost since mid-1982 and that unemployment is



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now in the 20- to 30-percent range. At the same time, underemployment (part-time, low-paying, make-work jobs)—which in recent years has stood at about 40 percent of the work force—is expected to surpass 50 percent this year. Moreover, Mexican Government statistics and our calculations show that real wages fell over 10 percent in 1982 and are likely to fall another 10 to 20 percent this year. Because of lower wages and falling imports and production, we estimate personal consumption will fall by 7 to 15 percent this year.

Problems in the agricultural sector last year added to the flow of migrants. Production was cut deeply by poor weather and sharply lower farm prices. Rainfall was 30 percent below normal last year and 75 percent below normal during the crucial months of June, July, August, and September. The fall harvest of corn, the peasants' principal staple and cash crop, fell 40 percent, while all grains and oilseed production declined 25 percent. As rural incomes plunged over the course of 1982, farmers' incentives to supplement incomes outside of farming increased. The concurrent Mexican industrial recession has also encouraged peasants to turn to the US labor market.

**No End in Sight**

We see almost no chance that the new wave of Mexican migration will slow dramatically any time soon. Because of Mexico's steep economic slide thus far in 1983, we believe even a mild recovery later this year would not be enough to slow the exodus. If, on the other hand, the drop in economic activity were to become even more pronounced, migration would speed up.

Moreover, we expect Mexico's economy to stay depressed for the next two to three years. Demographics will add to the pool of potential migrants. These factors are likely to keep the flow of migrants above the "normal trend" over the period.

Even if the economy recovers in the mid-to-late 1980s, employment in the United States will remain attractive because the absolute gap between wages in Mexico and the United States will almost surely increase through the rest of this century. As a result, the numbers of Mexican migrants will remain high. Should there be widespread political instability in Mexico, a dramatic increase in those crossing the border would follow.

**Mexican Government Perspectives**

The US Embassy reports that Mexican policymakers view large-scale temporary migration as critical to the country's economic and social well-being. In a nationalistic environment, however, government officials cannot publicly admit the importance of migration as a safety valve for social pressures or a source of foreign exchange. Moreover, political considerations prevent Mexican leaders from officially negotiating with the United States for continuing access to labor markets. As a result, we believe Mexican policy will continue to push for an open border and fair treatment for Mexican workers in the United States.

Mexican officials believe US immigration initiatives would not fundamentally change cross-border labor movements, but are concerned that they would sour other aspects of the bilateral relationship. According to US Embassy and academic reports, Mexican decisionmakers believe that US immigration reform would not alter the supply and demand conditions that undergird migration. Moreover, they believe US public opposition precludes the paramilitary operations they see as necessary to seal the border. According to the same sources, Mexican policymakers believe the growing political influence of Mexican-Americans will prevent massive deportations of the long-term illegals on the scale that occurred during 1929-33 or in 1954.

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## Appendix A

## Historic Illegal Migration Trends

Throughout this century, large numbers of Mexicans have traveled to the United States to supplement their standards of living. While many have come to stay, the majority have made temporary work trips of much less than a year. Even those that stay longer generally intend to return eventually to Mexico. During the last 70 years, complex migration networks have developed in response to economic and social trends in Mexico and the United States. These linkages frequently involve whole villages targeted to specific temporary jobs in the United States over extended periods of time.

The first great stimulus to illegal migration this century was the enormous economic dislocation caused by the violence of the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion in 1910 through 1929. During this period some 1.4 million Mexicans, or about one-tenth of the entire population, left Mexico for the United States. A backlash, caused in large part by the Great Depression and growing unemployment in the United States, resulted in the forced repatriation of 400,000 Mexicans during 1929-33.

The current pattern of short-term, work-related migration received its major impulse during 1942-64 when temporary migration to the United States became an important part of rural life in Mexico as a result of the *bracero* program. Initially, civilian job shortages caused by World War II encouraged American agribusiness to contract for Mexican workers. Later, as many as 40 percent of the *bracero* contracts were for nonfarm jobs. Contracts covering 4.6 million work trips were issued for agriculture alone during 1942-64. We estimate that on average about 300,000 legal *braceros* worked each year in the United States. At the peak of the program, some 450,000 contracts were issued annually.

During the *bracero* years, demographic and economic trends increased the numbers of Mexicans available and willing to go to the United States. Unprecedented population growth more than doubled the rural labor force. At the same time, commercial agriculture prospered because of mechanization and extensive irrigation projects, and subsistence agriculture stagnated. These trends significantly increased rural underemployment. As rural incomes fell relative to urban areas, many farm workers emigrated to the cities. For others, who were more attached to their land because they could not sell *ejido* property rights or because they lacked skills to compete in urban jobs, the response was temporary migration to agricultural jobs in the United States to supplement their incomes.

Even at the beginning of the *bracero* years, large numbers of Mexicans without legal contracts began making periodic work trips to the United States. Cost differences between following the formal labor contracting rules, and simply ignoring them, encouraged many to enter the United States without papers—particularly after they had fulfilled legal work contracts once or twice and had made informal personal arrangements to continue. In reaction to these illegals, and to growing unemployment in the United States as US soldiers returned from the Korean war (1950-53), an augmented Border Patrol deported more than a million undocumented *braceros* in 1954 in its "Operation Wetback."

The US Congress let the *bracero* program lapse at the end of 1964 and for the first time imposed a ceiling on immigration from the Western Hemisphere to the United States. Academic studies report, however, that the end of the *bracero* program did not greatly reduce work trips by Mexicans to the United States, but only made more of them illegal. Despite the increased Border Patrol budget, we believe that *bracero*-type work trips remained at about 300,000 to 400,000 per year in the mid-1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, border apprehension data and our analysis indicate that illegal migration rose to 500,000 to 800,000 per year, as higher education and the Vietnam war removed large numbers of young American



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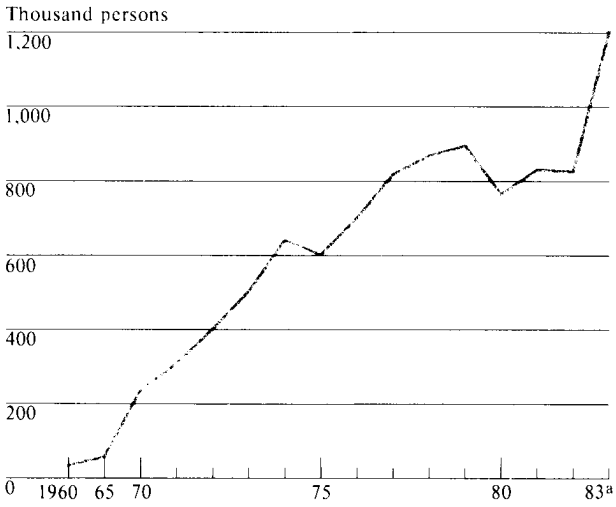
**Figure 3**
**Mexico-United States: Border Apprehensions, 1960-83**




[a] Projected.

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workers from fields and factories. In 1976 high population pressures and the first Mexican devaluation in 22 years boosted the flow to about 1 million. The increased flow encouraged the US Congress to tighten immigration restrictions and boost the border-enforcement budget. Even so, we estimate illegal migration has averaged 800,000 to 1.1 million in recent years.

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## Appendix B

## An Approach to Counting Illegals

Although we know of no accurate method of counting illegals—either the number that are currently in the United States or those that come and go each year—we believe that our own studies and others by US and Mexican officials and academics can establish a meaningful order of magnitude and provide some idea of changes in the flow of illegals.

We have no reliable data on the number of Mexicans who successfully cross the border each year. However, we believe Mexican demographic and employment data—particularly that of the sending states—indicate that the annual flow will most likely not exceed 2 million this year. US and Mexican surveys continue to show that 50 to 70 percent of all illegals are rural males from one of the eight sending states. From the latest census data we calculate the agricultural work force in the sending area at just less than 2 million. Academic studies indicate that while a large number of these workers migrate the share of those who do so in any one year is almost surely no greater than half. Moreover, we reason that if more than half of the rural work force migrated for four to six months during the year, domestic farm output would fall to unacceptable levels. Assuming that rural males from the principal sending states account for just one-half of all illegals—the lowest current estimate of their share—the upper bound for the annual flow of all illegals would be about 2 million.

Similarly, we use border apprehension data to set a lower bound of 600,000 for the number of illegal migrants crossing the border this year. A 1978 Mexican Government survey of 25,138 deported Mexicans indicated that each had been caught and deported—on average—twice by the US Border Patrol during the year. If, as we believe, these figures approximate the current relationship between the number of apprehensions and individual migrants caught, apprehensions of 1.2 million by the Border Patrol would indicate a minimum 600,000 illegal migrants coming into the United States this year.

**Mexico: Estimates of Illegal Aliens in the United States** *Millions*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Flows** [a] | |
| 1980 | 0.8 - 1.0 |
| 1981 | 0.8 - 1.0 |
| 1982 | 0.9 - 1.1 |
| 1983 | 1.1 - 1.5 |
| **Stock** | |
| Semipermanent stock illegals (midyear 1983) | 1.4 [b] - 2.5 [c] |
| Temporary stock illegals [d] (average 1983) | 0.3 [e] - 0.5 [f] |
| Total average stock of illegal aliens (average 1983) | 1.7 - 3.0 |

[a] Numbers of different individuals who successfully cross the border and work in the United States regardless of length of stay.
[b] Extrapolation of US Census estimates of minimum 1 April 1980 illegal Mexican population. See "Estimates of Illegal Aliens From Mexico Counted in the 1980 United States Census," by Robert Warren and Jeffery Passel, April 1983, released to the public in mid-June.
[c] Assumes Warren-Passel study undercounted 60 percent.
[d] Weighted average of those who come during 1983, despite length of stay.
[e] Assumes temporaries stay on average four months.
[f] Assumes temporaries stay on average six months.

Our own estimate of 1.1-1.5 million illegal migrants this year falls in the middle of the bounds set by Mexican demographic data and border apprehensions. We believe that a large majority of those apprehended at the border eventually get into the United States, and that an equal or greater number are able to enter without observation each year. Current academic and press estimates of some 2-3 million border-crossers for the annual flow are at or above our upper bound.

Demographic studies also can be used to set upper and lower bounds on the stock of Mexicans living here indefinitely. Our own studies of Mexican population data set an upper bound of about 2 million for the



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semipermanent stock in 1980. The total of rural males in Mexico between 15 and 64 years was 5.7 million in 1980, and 2 million illegals would be equivalent to one-third of the rural males in the migration-prone years or about half of the work force from the eight primary sending states. A recent study at the US Census Bureau [5] compared immigration statistics with the 1980 census and found 931,000 illegal Mexicans in the United States on 1 April 1980. We believe this sets a minimum. Based on the two limits, we judge that as of 1 April 1980 the stock of Mexican illegals was 1-1.6 million.

Considering these trends to mid-1983, we estimate the semipermanent stock of Mexican illegal aliens at 1.4-2.5 million. Then, by adding a weighted average of the temporary migrants, we put the total at an average of 1.7-3.0 million. Because visa and alien registration data indicate that there are currently 1.3 million legal Mexican aliens in the United States, we estimate that the average stock of Mexican aliens—legal and illegal—in the United States during 1983 will be 3-4.3 million.

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[5] "Estimates of Illegal Aliens From Mexico Counted in the 1980 United States Census" by Robert Warren and Jeffery Passel of the US Bureau of the Census, April 1983. (U)



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